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AP Language and Composition

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06 January 2010

Choice Board: Literary Analysis

            The short stories “Once Upon a Time” and “Miss Brill” both carry a great amount of symbolism in the few pages they span. However, the types of symbolism the stories deliver are different, and the way the authors choose to convey symbolism is naturally not the same. While it is safe to say both short stories achieve some type of compression through the use of symbols, how easy it is to distinguish this compression varies between the stories.The symbolism in *Once Upon a Time* comes across more easily to the reader when compared to *Miss Brill*. Although *Miss Brill* is not a hard read, the symbolism is not as blatantly obvious and has less room for multiple interpretations.

The short story *Once Upon a Time* is about a family, which consists of a husband, wife, son, housemaid, cat, and dog, and how they go to great lengths to protect their house from being broken into and robbed. The title of the story presses one to think of a fairytale, which is important since most of the symbols in the text point to certain fairytales, in particular the tale of *Sleeping Beauty*. The story begins with, “[in a house, in a suburb, in a city, there were a man and his wife who loved each other very much and were living happily ever after” (Arp 221). The wording of the beginning itself reminds the reader of a fairytale, which usually is either unrealistic or fake. As mentioned, the family tries to protect their house from crime, which is the reason they purchase a barbed wire to place around the wall that surrounds their house. The wall, whether acquired with barbed wire or not, represents the castle in *Sleeping Beauty*. The wire represents the thorns Maleficent places in front of the castle to delay the prince. The son of the family represents Prince Philip, as the young boy tries to climb over the wall and coincidentally gets stuck in the wire.

“Once Upon a Time” displays symbolism that is slightly compressed. There are many smaller aspects of the story that symbolize fairytales or *Sleeping Beauty* and are never explained as even being a symbol. For example, the company that installs the barbed wire is called Dragon’s Teeth, which is a nod towards Maleficent when she turns into a dragon. However, the whole idea of the boy, the wall, and the barbed wire representing *Sleeping Beauty* is not at all compressed. The entire last paragraph of “Once Upon a Time” explains how the young boy had *Sleeping Beauty* read to him as a bedtime story and was then inspired to act like the prince, climb over the barbed wire or “thorns,” and enter the palace or reach the other side of the wall to save his princess. This paragraph of the story really leaves no room for analysis. The symbolism is fully laid out and explained to the reader. The only instances of symbolic compression are given to small, unimportant details of the plot.

The other short story,“Miss Brill”, is about an old woman named Miss Brill. Brill does the same thing every Sunday afternoon; she goes out in what she believes to be a fine fur coat, sits on a bench to people watch, listens to the band, and sometimes stops at the baker’s on her way home. Miss Brill feels she is a regular part of the Sunday routine that goes on in town. She eventually learns though, that she is neither recognized every week nor really even wanted at the events. Teenagers describe the coat Brill is so proud of as being a “fried whiting” and a “funny” thing (Arp 178). Miss Brill immediately returns home realizing she is not very well liked and has become a lonely old woman. The fur coat is able to symbolize the woman Brill realizes she has become. At the beginning of the story, Brill is both confident of herself and her fur coat. More important is the end, where she discovers the opposite is true of both her and the coat. When Brill “put the lid [back] on [the box of the fur coat,] she thought she heard someone crying” (Arp 179). Realistically, Brill is the only one who could be crying as she is alone, but the text makes it appear as though the coat is crying from its own rejection.

“Miss Brill” is a story with symbolism that is much more compressed than the likes of “Once Upon a Time*.*” The author of “Miss Brill” doesn’t take time to explain the similarities between the coat and Miss Brill or how the coat is a symbol of Brill. Anything the reader feels is a symbol is a product of his or her own mind. No one way of deciphering symbolism in this story is more correct than another. This fact in itself is a true example of what compressed symbolism should be. When a story does not have symbolic interpretation written out for the reader, more than likely there is compressed symbolism.

Overall, when “Miss Brill” and “Once Upon a Time” are compared, “Miss Brill” is a more defined example of compressed symbolism. This outcome does not at all make “MissBrill” the better read or the more celebrated story. However, the reason does make “Miss Brill” more likely to be considered a literary piece. “Once Upon a Time” still has plenty of symbolism; nonetheless, the symbols are explained or expressed in a different way than that of “Miss Brill.”

Works Cited

Arp, Thomas R., and Greg Johnson. *Perrine's Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense*. Ninth ed. Massachusetts: Thomas Higher Education, 2006. 175-79, 220-25, 274-75, 279-81. Print.